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ON MY MIND | A. M. Rosenthal

No Suicide for Israel

It happens to everybody from time to time. We believe certain things about a matter of important controversy and we say them. But when we hear the same points made by others, we become queasy and know something is wrong or missing.

Many of us have been saying the same things about Israel: Israel cannot go on forever being an occupying power. Jews must not break bones. Israeli use of force against young Palestinians is costing her support around the world. Israel must enter negotiations on Gaza and the West Bank.

Right, right. But sometimes when I hear or read these points, which I have made myself, made over and over by others, I find myself deeply uneasy. It is not because there is no validity in them, but because so often they are presented empty of the historic realities that brought about the crisis and must be understood to find a way out.

This is an attempt to set down the political, military and historic truths that raise fears about the road that many American intellectuals, journalists and senators are demanding Israel take.

Causes: The critics' implication is that the cause of the current crisis is Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's opposition to an international conference and his refusal to agree in advance to cede West Bank territory.

This is not true. The cause is 40 years of Arab refusal to accept the existence of Israel, 40 years of furious hostility and military attempts to destroy her.

You do not have to like Mr. Shamir to realize that if the Arabs had accepted Israel in the beginning or for 20 years thereafter, all of the West Bank and Gaza and other territory would today be part of a Palestinian state.

If you believe that the very existence of Israel is anathema, you are right to see her policies as the root cause of the Mideast ugliness. Otherwise not.

Occupation: Some critics also act as if it were Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 that led to so many years of unrest and skirmishing there.

This too is a historic distortion. It was the Arab countries that seized Gaza and the West Bank, which were to be part of the Palestinian state under the 1947 U.N. partition plan, and occupied them for 20 years — not in peace but with constant harassment and attack against Israel.

Finally Israel struck back. Her unhappy occupation of the West Bank is a result, not the cause, of aggression — Arab aggression.

Negotiation: With whom and for what? The U.S. proposes an international conference with the Big Five participating. Since Britain and France are cool to Israel and the Soviet Union and China are hostile, the chicken is being invited to negotiate under the sponsorship of four foxes and a lame dove. To think the major powers would not pressure Israel for Arab advantage is not only naïve but black comedy.

It is not the Big Five Israel must live with, but the Palestinians, and other Arabs. Which Arab states have promised to negotiate directly with Israel? None. Which Arab leaders are criticizing Palestinians sworn to the elimination of Israel? Where are the "moderate" Palestinians who can swerve the young men of Gaza and the West Bank away from seeking Israel's death?

Stakes: Israel is fighting for survival. The Arab states are fighting out of anti-Israel hatred and fear of the Palestinians. The young Palestinians are fighting for a new Palestinian state because they hate the ruler of a present state with a Palestinian majority: Jordan. They plan to eliminate King Hussein one day and swallow Jordan as part of their own single Palestine.

The making of Mideast ugliness.

As things stand, any ceded West Bank territory will become a de facto state run by the P.L.O. and other Palestinians sworn to destroy Israel. Those young Palestinians would not be hurling stones from their territory but rockets.

Solutions: Open pressure on Israel to make concessions must be accompanied by open pressure on the Arabs. Palestinians must accept totally and clearly the right of Israel to live forever, secure and in peace. The U.S. and the Arab leaders can achieve this and guarantee it, if we have the will and they the courage.

Mr. Shamir may not promise in advance to cede "territory for peace." That is what direct talks are for.

But the definition of peace cannot mean Palestinians continuing war to the death. And they too must feel hard pressure to do some ceding, specifically of their demand for another Palestinian state in a region where one already exists, and to negotiate in peaceful stages for the eventual goal: a single Jordan-Palestine.

Americans have a right to criticize Israel. They have a right to suggest solutions — but not the suggestion of suicide. □